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# Ancestors in the Asia-Pacific Context

## Identity, Roles, and Ancestry

How does one pay respect to one's ancestors? This is one of the most important questions people ask all around the world. Such inquiry assumes that life continues after death, and this assumption undergirds the many varied rituals and ceremonies in honor of the departed. Scott Moreau adds that "the cult of the ancestors has critical social functions such as maintaining order in society through sustaining respect for the elders and adherence to social roles" (2000:59). Ancestors are expected to provide the living protection, material and spiritual blessing, while the living are required to continue to respect the ancestors as they are done for the living elders. Lack of respect or disrespect towards the departed may in turn bring bad luck or suffering.

Looking at ancestor cults from an anthropological perspective, Mary Douglas contends that dealing with ancestors is

one of the very important functions of religions throughout the world. . . . Ancestors can take some of the weight of explaining pain and suffering. If they are cast as very moral, they want their descendants to be good to each other, and punish their sins with misfortune. Or if the ancestors are thought to be spiteful and jealous they may inflict suffering on the living. (2012:176-177)

The Bible attributes no action to deceased ancestors, the only one in control being God. Monotheism makes God the agent of both good and evil, in spite of Satan positioning himself as the adversary and the source of all evil and suffering.

Douglas considers informal explanations of agency as popular beliefs; however, when such explanations become institutionalized, they form an ancestor cult that requires worship. Ancestor worship can take several forms, one being seeking advice from or offering it to the living. In Douglas' words, "The great benefit to the society at large is that the tragedies are not laid at the door of living persons; an ancestor cult allows amnesty for the living, the dead carry the blame" (2012:179).

An ancestor's role may be to insure the status of a person or community. Other times an ancestor is invoked for protection when a rebellion against the colonists or oppressors is called for. An ancestor may provide a name for a family or for an entire genealogical line. Political contenders may claim that an ancestor empowered and called them to run for an office or become an uncontested leader. The entire process has to do with the distribution of power across generations.

Some members of the community often claim that they have direct access to the ancestors, communicating with them and performing rituals to appease and control them. Such intermediaries may be shamans, medicine men, quack doctors, or the Filipino *albularyo*. Rituals that they recommend are assumed to carry power to overturn bad luck and suffering in life, as well as appeasing the anger of the spirits when mistakes or lack of respect was shown toward them; however, biblical repentance, renewal, and reformation require that images are forbidden, that magic is repudiated, and any divination or acknowledging of minor powerful spiritual beings is excluded. This clear injunction creates a gap between biblical monotheism and most other religious systems.

Douglas also notes that ancestor worship is used to control communities, especially to subdue younger generations. Attitudes toward authority are shaped by fear of the unknown and the realization that the future is tied to the power of the dead. "The more the living old can impose their authority on the living young, the more we should expect [a] cult of the dead. Those in control use the idea of the interventionist dead to warn the young against insubordination" (2012:189). Any rebellion of the young against the older generation announces mistrust of the old people alive and no special respect for them when they are dead. "The wheel of culture turns according to the swings in the relation between generations" (189). The young fear the old sorcerers and their power, but at the same time, sorcerers may be eliminated so their spell on the future may be broken.

Philip Esler states that an interpretation of (biblical) texts indicates communion with the deceased authors. He believes that "human beings are genetically disposed to respect their ancestors. . . . While our deceased relatives and friends have no rights, who would deny that we have a duty, at the level of common humanity, to honor their memory? We do so in di-

verse ways, from keeping portraits of them on our walls, to visiting their graves, to dedicating books to their memory, and so on" (2005:215, 214).

For Esler, the biblical text is made up of messages sent by biblical authors, "our ancestors in faith . . . a hard-copy version of the living voices of Paul and all the rest—proclaimed, heard, and acted upon" (2005:216). Esler considers that on the one hand "these authors enliven our present identity," and on the other hand "their words come to us not as binding decrees but as revelations of the lives in Christ possible when the faith was formed and shaped by the distinctive cultures in which it emerged" (226).

"The dead were often seen in family religion as benefactors of their descendants, particularly in the bequest of ancestral land" (Brett 2008:53). Naboth refuses to sell the land inherited from his ancestors calling it "the inheritance of my fathers" (1 Kgs 21:3 with a parallel in 1 Sam 14:16 "the inheritance of Elohim"). Stones and pillars had been dedicated on the land to mark the origin as a gift from the ancestors.

Among Christians, the veneration of the dead and of their remains is very popular. From early times, Roman Christians believed that the martyrs were alive and that they had special powers. Calling on them to intervene in daily life became popular. "This process was thought to be more efficacious if the petitioners could place themselves as close as possible to the particular martyr's physical remains. . . . By the practice of invocation, living Christians thought that they enjoyed a personal interaction with the saints whose memories they treasured" (Esler 2005:224). Rituals were developed to make the martyrs happy and to appease their anger.

Ancestors are part of daily life for people in many parts of the world. In China, for example, houses are not only intended to offer comfort for the living, but to provide communion between the dead ancestors, the living family members, and the unborn who represent the next generations. For Africans, the visible and invisible world are interconnected. The ancestors' role is to "guarantee the integrity and vitality of the community. All this produces an intensely felt sense of solidarity between members of a community" (Esler 2015:216). Without the ancestors and the supernatural, Africans feel incomplete.

Esler finds that the communion between the living and their predecessors is a dynamic exchange process.

Every group is, to an extent, engaged in the reconstruction of its shared past to serve the needs of the present. Its leaders are social agents with a firm grasp on group identities, practices, and ideas who also have the capacity to pass them on to others. . . . Our link with the past is a balance of persistence and change, continuity and newness. . . . The holy Christian men and women who have died in Christ will very often be culturally distant from us. Yet we hold in common with

them a set of practices, beliefs, ideas, and aspirations centered on faith in Jesus Christ. . . . We are able to see them as prototypes of Christian identity and as providing it with a stock of 'possible selves.' From what they have been in the past, we gain a sense of what we can be, now or in the future. (2005:225)

In other religions, the main question is not so much what happens to the dead, but "how to deal with the ghost that was apt to revisit and disturb the survivors. The practical question was how to induce the ghost to go away and to stay away" (Jevons 1985:63). Funeral rites and ceremonies are often intended to take care of the ancestors' spirits. The life of the soul after death is often associated with how well the living preserve the body of the dead. One of the main fears is that the body was not buried properly. The popular belief is that the ghost of the dead returns in a dream, or even as real, to express the anger of the body for not being treated properly. People believe that the ancestors' souls can return and impact the present and future life of living relatives.

In order to avoid the wrath of the ancestors, the deceased person's personal items are placed in the coffin or in the grave. Sometimes a mausoleum is built and equipped in the same way the bedroom was where the deceased used to spend their resting time. If ancestors have everything they need, it is believed that they have no reason to return. In rural China, people abandon "the dwelling of the dead man and everything that belonged to him" in order not to upset the dead or give them any reason for returning (Jevons 1985:65). Giving everything was considered an offering that was to be repeated at different intervals in order to make sure the deceased stays away. Traditional Christians visit the graves of their deceased relatives at least on All Souls' Day. Chinese visit the graves twice a year with abundant offerings.

The ancestors' wrath is considered more powerful and effective than the wrath of the gods. In fact, ancestors are seen as intermediaries between gods and humans. They are not the source of blessings, but can mediate in behalf of humans to the gods. The gods in China, for example, are depicted in human form in the temples. They are no longer worshipped by communities but by individuals with private offerings, the same as people do to their ancestors. As a result, ancestor worship replaced over time, worship to the gods.

## Case Studies

### China and Hong Kong

Some people believe that the Chinese are the “greatest people on earth” because of their tradition of paying respects to their ancestors” (Butcher 1994:397). Well-preserved funeral shrines may be seen all over the place in China and Hong Kong. When the Rites controversy took place, resulting in the papal edict of 1740, Confucian filial piety was the major problem. Although Matteo Ricci and the Jesuits who followed him tried to contextualize the rituals related to ancestors, the issue proved to be too sensitive. Butcher aptly notes that “perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of Nestorianism to establish itself in China at that time is precisely because it went too far in attempting to integrate the existing traditions it found there, and thereby lost its defining power as a religion in its own right” (1994:444).

In China, the gods are depicted in human form. Beautiful or ugly, laughing or scaring people, they are part of the “pantheon” of symbols honored by people in a special way. While they are no longer worshipped by entire communities, individuals bring food offerings, hence the confusion between ancestors and deities. The “offering to gods” ritual requires that the ancestors are invited to eat first, followed by the rest of the living family. The offerings are always placed before the ancestors’ tablets, and the family is expected to speak to the gods in behalf of the individual or the family bringing the offering. The Chinese use a make-see approach, with sacrifices and offerings brought as replacements or images of people made out of paper, of clay, or of straw. Although the offerings preserve the ritual that is done with the replacements, the gods are believed to be real because people expect real blessings as a result of their sacrifices. Filial piety lays at the basis of the ancestor worship ritual, and it is rather a duty than an expectation of real gain.

Ancestors are buried in columbary, well above the city, in order to have them watch and protect the living. People have to climb hundreds of steps in order to get to their beloved. All this effort is considered making merit for the ancestors. Candles or sticks are lighted and all senses are involved. The number of dragons placed at the corners of the columbary roof indicates the status of the ancestors buried there.

### Korea

Ancestor worship was always part of Korean life, bringing together religion and kinship relations based on Confucian philosophy. Young

people were supposed to care for the elderly and to continue to do that even after their death. The departed were never considered dead but were viewed as the living dead. Death was only a new state in which the ancestors would move and continue to exist for at least four generations. Sung-Deuk Oak considers that “through ancestor worship the group’s *qi* (material force or energy) was activated and descent was thereby ritually reinforced” (2013:190-191). This *qi* was the concept that united all descendants. Confucianism was based on family unity and ancestor worship became the pinnacle of the rituals related to filial piety. Oak notes that “the only unpardonable sin was the lack of filial piety, from which every other virtue flowed” (192).

Ceremonies usually took place several times a year, around midnight, at which time the ancestors’ spirits were invited to partake of food and drink. The ritual also involved an invocation to the spirits, bowing down before them, prayers, as well as burning incense. Lastly, after sending off the spirits, the family would enjoy the food that they also shared with their neighbors the following day. Such rituals were also performed at the graves of the ancestors, which were usually located on a mountainside. Placing food on the grave and spilling wine was part of the ceremony designed to entice the ancestors to bless the family for the incoming year. Pilgrimages to the gravesites took place annually, and the graves were considered sacred places.

Unlike the Buddhist belief that at the end of life one disappears in Nirvana or reincarnates, Confucians “believed that they would achieve immortality by ensuring the continuity of their family bloodline” (Oak 2013:193). The entire set of rituals related to ancestors blended soteriological beliefs with family identity. “Ancestor worship was a sacred rite for the prosperity of the living that depended on harmony with the ancestors, traditions, and the cosmos” (193). What Christians call worship and religion is a way of life in all other religions. One cannot stop respecting the ancestors without ceasing to be part of that community and nation. While Christians invite converts to join the new community of God’s kingdom, they cannot simply abandon the traditional communities they came from. People feel that Christianity is asking them to abandon their genealogies, identities, and past in order to embrace an idealistic uncertain future. Ancestors were real, while the new community is viewed as utopic.

With this as a background, it is little wonder that Christian converts often return to their original way of life when only a religion was offered to them. Oak remarked that “personal salvation apart from the ancestral line represented an overwhelming existential crisis, and choosing to sever this tie was a difficult choice. Thus some seekers lapsed into the old custom” (2013:206).

In Korea, the most difficult decision and the last item to give up before a person was baptized was to bury or burn the ancestral tablets. These tablets contain the name of the deceased person and people believe that they contain the actual spirit of the ancestor. Incense sticks are burned by the side of the tablet and food is often placed before it. The tablets are made of a variety of materials, but sometimes out of paper so the ancestors could be easily moved when migrating or during emergencies. Ancestor worship became the most difficult obstacle in the process of conversion to Christianity.

The second major obstacle in people's conversion to Christianity was the social pressure and even persecution. Ostracism was triggered by the burial or burning of the tablets and the refusal to worship the ancestors. The accusation of being "unfilial" became the mantra under which Christians were accused of having "no father and no king." Any tragedy or loss among the members of the family was attributed to the ancestors who became angry for not being shown respect. The greatest anathema for Christian converts was to have their name erased from the family's genealogy and to be excommunicated.

### Gypsies in Europe

Gypsies came to Europe more than a thousand years ago but remained an unintegrated ethnic group. They have their own traditions, languages, and worldview that are very similar to the North Punjab where they originated from. The average life span of gypsies is short compared with those of the countries they live in, exceptions being considered "a sign that they are especially in favor with the good fairies, and have been exceptionally successful in conciliating the evil ones. Age is therefore, greatly respected" (Block 1939:241), although Gypsies do not know their precise age since birth certificates are rarely present. They do not celebrate birthdays, but name days, especially for old people (Gropper 1975:111).

For Gypsies death is a short sleep, a short interruption of life that continues on "the other side," while the spirits of the ancestors living in the underworld have power over living people. Gypsies do not talk negatively about their ancestors out of fear of vengeance. "Their concern at death deals almost entirely with the question of what relationship the dead will have with those who remain among the living" (Trigg 1973:96). The duty of a gypsy is to honor the ancestors.

When a Gypsy dies, two traditions exist. The nomadic Gypsies simply bury their ancestors wherever they are at the moment, and no sign marks the place of burial. The memory of the deceased is preserved in traditional songs passed on to the next generations, to which one or more stanzas are



added. In case of the death of a settled Gypsy, the extended family comes from wherever they are around the world. Funerals and burial ceremonies are merry occasions where people eat and drink and sometimes play games. Gypsies keep wakes where extraordinary stories of exaggerated heroism from the life of the deceased are told. The oldest person in the room begins a story, and everyone else follows. People are assigned to help keep order since Gypsies have the tendency to talk all at once. "Such gatherings provide an occasion for the younger ones to learn about their history and culture" (Dumitrescu 2010:40).

At the cemetery, the burial place is prepared as a regular bedroom, with all the items an ancestor may need: mirror, hair combs, tooth brushes, antiperspirant, broom and mop, money, shoes, makeup, and hats. All these possessions help the ancestor receive the appropriate honor when crossing to "the other side." People shout messages that the deceased is supposed to share with the rest of the ancestors in behalf of the living. Letters to the ancestors may be read aloud or placed in the casket or in the grave, if relatives are literate. Older Gypsies did not learn to read or write, and often use Romani words that refer to reading the palm rather than a written text (Fonseca 1995:11). Grave markers can be items remembering some characteristics of the deceased: money, expensive bottles of alcohol, cassette tapes, LPs, jewelry, and even a replica of an ATM if the person was a shopaholic. Often, no dates are engraved on the grave marker.

During the funeral, relatives of the deceased are not taking showers, and women do not comb their hair. After the funeral, it brings honor to announce the cost of the funeral and the number of participants. If the deceased had no children, the costs are supported by the extended family. No gifts or donations are accepted, but money can be borrowed.

The family grieves for at least a year, wearing only black clothes. Males are required not to shave for a year. Weddings are postponed during that year, and any joyous events are canceled. TVs are unplugged and any source of merriment is removed. Relatives are not supposed to smile or laugh. Food and water are often placed outside the house, in case the ancestor visits and needs to be satisfied. A visit from the spirit of an ancestor is considered a special honor. Before the New Year, a bucket of water is poured on the ground signifying that plenty of water is provided for the ancestors to keep them happy. A remembrance meal is offered to the family and to the poor people in honor of the ancestor after 40 days and one year after the death.



## The Kanak of New Caledonia

Ancestor rituals among the 341 tribes of New Caledonia are very diverse. From preserving the mummy of the ancestor to the totems planted by the seashore to guard the spirits of the deceased and protect the living from these spirits, ancestor rituals are present and alive. The world of the spirits blends with the world of the living. Major public celebrations are often related to the ancestors.

During the second half of the 19th century, the Kanak fought against the French because of the inhumane treatment received from the colonizers. In 1878, the French colonizers killed Ataï, one of the leaders of the Kanak tribe. Ataï was beheaded and his skull deposited in a museum in Paris. For more than a hundred years, the Kanak suffered the shame of not being able to pay the due respects to their deceased leader through an honorable burial. Decapitated bodies are shameful. The entire tribe felt the shame brought against their leader.

For decades, when official requests were submitted by the Kanak asking the French to return Ataï's skull, the French claimed it was lost, had disappeared, and that it had no value anyway. However, for the Kanak, it was an open wound and permanent reason for shame. Finally, in an attempt to earn the Kanak's favor, the French government announced that the skull was found in the Museum of Humankind and returned to the island; however, the authorities refused to provide proper land for the burial. By the time I visited Noumea and the Kanak tribal lands in 2017, Ataï's skull was still not buried. The tribe still hopes that the French government will agree to apologize and provide an honorable burial for one of the Kanak's most revered ancestors.

In the middle of the Kanak tribal land is located the Grand Hut. Shaped as a cone, this hut serves as the sanctuary for the ancestor spirits. Although most of the Kanak are Christians, their worldview is clearly animistic. Tourists are not allowed to enter the hut without permission and without being guided. The chief is the one inviting the ancestors when there is a problem within the tribe or a conflict between tribes. The entire Kanak population gathers on the open mall in front of the hut, each tribe with its leader. The chief summons the ancestors for advice. Only the tribal leaders are allowed to enter the hut, where the chief maintains a permanent kindling fire. A hole is provided in the back of the hut for the spirits to enter, and a basket located at the top of the main pole provides rest for them.

All the elements of the Grand Hut symbolize the unity of the ancestors with the living, of the spirits with the humans. Totems and carved images of the ancestral spirits guard the entrance into the hut. Leaning poles are provided in order to teach humans of their need to bow before their

ancestors as a sign of respect and obedience. A *flèche faîtière* (slender spire) sits on top of the hut symbolizing the unity of the three spheres of the world: the spirit world, the human world, and the underworld. It is a symbol of transition between the dead and the living. Even the tall trees surrounding the open gathering mall line up with their tops almost united as a symbol of unity between the living and their dead ancestors.

*La Coutume* is an ancestral set of rules and rituals, a code of social relations that outlines the Kanaks' relationships with the world, the ancestors, the land, and the community. It defines their relationship to the material world, to the unseen world, and to other people (LaFargue 2012:5-6). *La Coutume* provides a visible form to allow *La Parole* (the tradition and history passed on to them by the ancestors) to manifest itself among people; it is a set of practices that the Kanak have developed to give the Word—*La Parole*—a form, a body through the expressions and symbols of *La Coutume* (Klein 2012:8). The Kanak worldview cannot be understood without comprehending *La Coutume* and *La Parole*, and the symbols, meanings, and functions attached to them. The heritage that is so closely tied to the ancestors is kept alive, and these traditions, in turn, shape the lives of the Kanak.

### Toraja of Borneo

To the Torajans, Bentian, and other groups in Borneo, the ancestors are real and are viewed as part of the community. In spite of recording a Christian majority, and claiming the highest statue of Christ blessing the valley, Torajans continue to perform traditional rituals related to ancestors. Upon death, the deceased is placed in the best part of the house in a bed and watched carefully. To many visitors, the dead person looks like a person in a deep sleep. They are fed daily as though they are alive, and periodically they are washed and refreshed. Dead bodies can be kept in this state until the family collects enough money to organize the traditional mass animal sacrifice.

Torajans, in contrast to other Borneo groups, believe that human beings are born with different statuses. As Clifford Sather observed, "Hierarchically-ranked 'kinds of people' (nobles, commoners, slaves) are each believed to have been created in a different manner and that these differences are 'actuated' in funerary rituals through animal sacrifices" (2012:130). Thus, animal sacrifices are intended to bridge the gap between the living and their ancestors, to the point where the living can "think and feel the desires of the dead" (Tsinjilonis 2004:381).

Although Torajans care for their deceased, and refresh their bodies periodically, the long-term process aims to incorporate them into the "generalized ancestral spirit" (Coville 2002:70). Kenneth Sillander notes that

when the ancestors merge into the general ancestral body “as nobody’s ancestors in particular they are everybody’s ancestors” (2012:87) and filial piety becomes mandatory for everyone in the larger community.

The animal sacrifice is a ceremony where all the community participates. The more animals sacrificed, the more honor the deceased and the family receives. Young people train for weeks ahead of the event in order to be able to cut the throat of the bulls in one move. The actual scene of the carnage is grotesque. However, the family rejoices when the horns of the bulls are placed on the entrance of the house, increasing their honor in the community. Some families may have to repay the borrowed money for the rest of their lives, but nothing compares for them with the new status in the community.

When babies die, they are considered unborn and are buried within tree trunks. In time, these small “coffins” are covered by the bark of the growing trees. The dead and the unborn are part of the living. Both the ancestors and the unborn are spirits that can affect the lives of the living.

After the animal sacrifice and the end of the ceremonies and festivities, the dead body is carried to the burial place in a triumphal march. The body is placed on a throne and often enclosed into a replica of a Toraja house, with the ends of the roof pointing upward. This is the symbol that the world of the living and the realm of the dead are communicating. The dead are carried to caves dug into high rocks, and a replica of the person is placed at the entrance to remind the community that the ancestors are watching them. Small bits of flesh from the sacrificed animals are placed on top of the stone pillars that form a “Stonehenge.” These are supposed to be reminding the ancestors of the great sacrifice the families made in their behalf. In response, the ancestors should not threaten the community but bless them.

At regular times, the dead bodies are retrieved from the caves and taken through a process of restoration. The bodies are painted, their clothes are changed, glasses and prescriptions are updated, and in this way they are endeared to the community. Eloquent speeches are made praising the ancestors and inviting them to bless the community since it is believed that filial piety has to be demonstrated in a very palpable way.

## Conclusions

Looking at the described cases, there are common burial features and rituals, as well as differences in how different cultures treat their ancestors. Filial piety seems to be a common factor, as well as the belief that the ancestors continue to live in the community or in the surroundings, being able to affect the lives of the living. All cultures described in this article

seem to espouse a worldview in which the spirit world blends with the world of the senses in an animistic way.

In conclusion, I offer several recommendations derived from the study:

1. Seventh-day Adventists need to discover a theology of biblical filial piety. Such a theology should be produced by local Christians who have not embraced Christianity with all the Western values.
2. Christian funeral rites that speak to the local culture, using functional substitutes, also need to be developed.
3. Missionaries should design indigenous memorial services that can be part of the local way of life. This is the most difficult step for Adventists because they do not believe in the existence of the soul after death and follow the second commandment. Christian denominations that have no problems with their believers bowing down before icons or statues (Catholics or Eastern Orthodox) seem to use a conciliatory approach and be more open to accept converts continuing their ancestor worship rituals. Protestants, however, have a more exclusive approach to the issues related to the second commandment, but Protestant missionaries in certain countries developed a similar form of a memorial service at the beginning of the 20th century. The Koreans adapted a memorial ritual, Ch'udohoe, that may be a starting point.
4. Presenting God as the Great Ancestor should be explored within the local context. The Bible uses language as "The Ancient of days," or "the Alpha and the Omega." Creative solutions are required in order to find the best theology and rituals that remain both biblically faithful and contextually relevant.

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